

# What is a metaverse and why is everyone talking about it?

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Ariana Grande wowed fans inside the video game Fornite  
Epic Games

Millions of Ariana Grande fans attended a [string of concerts last week](#), held not in a traditional venue but within the video game *Fortnite*. These huge events, complete with music and surreal 3D graphics, are the latest example of Silicon Valley's new favourite buzzword: a metaverse.

## What is a metaverse?

It's a shared online space that incorporates 3D graphics, either on a screen or in [virtual reality](#). Science fiction author Neal Stephenson coined the term in his 1992 novel *[Snow Crash](#)*, which features a future virtual reality version of the internet called the Street: a 100-metre-wide road that runs around the 65,536-kilometre-circumference of a fictional planet. More recently, a metaverse called OASIS featured in the novel and film *[Ready Player One](#)*.

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## But that's sci-fi – what about the real world?

Perhaps the first attempt to create a real metaverse was *Second Life*, a virtual environment that launched in 2003 and grew to around a million regular users at its peak. Its creator, Linden Labs, said in 2007 that *Second Life* was [no simple video game](#): “There is no manufactured conflict, no set objective.” Essentially, there was nothing specific you were supposed to achieve – it was just an environment for mingling and communicating. It had its own currency and users could build property, organise events and design their own avatar.

Long before Ariana Grande's performance in *Fortnite*, [Duran Duran staged concerts within \*Second Life\* in 2006](#), and later even [opened their own headquarters within the virtual environment](#) where fans could play themed games and watch content about the band.

Other video game developers also have their eyes on becoming a metaverse. Take *Roblox*, which allows players to create and share their own games. “Just as the mail, the telegraph, the telephone, text and video are utilities for collaborative work, we believe *Roblox* and the metaverse will join these as essential tools for business communication,” co-founder David Baszucki [told \*The New York Times\*](#). If that sounds unlikely, consider that players [spent almost 10 billion hours](#) inside *Roblox* in the first quarter of this year.

## I've also seen Mark Zuckerberg talking about a metaverse.

Facebook has been a place for users to talk and share information online for almost two decades, but last month founder Mark Zuckerberg [announced](#) that it will become, or at least spawn, a metaverse called Horizon.

On top of the current web and app versions of Facebook, the company will offer either augmented reality or virtual reality universes where users can interact with each other. Facebook currently claims to have 2.85 billion monthly active users. If they all get on board with the Facebook metaverse then it would become easily the biggest VR and metaverse experiment to date, but creating a visual system that can handle that sort of foot traffic will be no mean feat.

[Speaking to CNET](#) in May, Zuckerberg said: “We want to get as many people as possible to be able to experience virtual reality and be able to jump into the metaverse and... to have these social experiences within that.”

The move sheds more light on the 2014 purchase by Facebook of VR headset maker Oculus for \$2.3 billion. If Facebook starts to migrate millions or billions of users from a website and app to a virtual reality metaverse then it will be able to make a profit by selling them all the necessary hardware.

Microsoft, too, is talking about becoming a leader in the field of “[metaverse apps](#)” and also has its own augmented reality hardware, [HoloLens](#).

## Why is everyone so keen all of a sudden?

While metaverses and virtual reality have been available for decades, they have remained niche and far from convincing. But the hardware and software has advanced to a point where it's entirely possible that they could reach a tipping point.

Spearheaded by gaming, metaverses using virtual or augmented reality on affordable and powerful devices could become far more popular and start offering truly practical or entertaining features.

And of course, there is a lot of money to be made. *Fortnite* made \$9 billion in revenue in 2018 and 2019 combined, with people paying to customise their avatar. *Fortnite's* developer, Epic Games, updated the iOS version of its software in 2020 to allow people to make direct payments, bypassing Apple's payment system. In turn Apple, keen for a slice of the profit, kicked *Fortnite* off the App Store. [The two companies are now in a legal battle.](#)

## What other tech is needed to make a metaverse work?

The decentralised technology behind cryptocurrencies may also play a role. One metaverse called [Decentraland](#) has an associated currency called MANA that can be used to buy land or [NFT artwork](#) within it. Auction house Sotheby's, which is pushing hard into the NFT world, owns a piece of Decentraland, where it has built a replica of its London galleries – this is the kind of thing organisations were getting up to in *Second Life* over a decade ago.

Meanwhile, the [Open Metaverse Interoperability Group](#) is pushing for a future where different metaverses share technology so that avatars can move seamlessly from one to another, just as you can move from one website to another on the internet without changing your browser.

Whether any metaverse will replace the current internet, as predicted by Stephenson, is less clear. It's hard to imagine what advantage a 3D environment would bring to looking something up on Wikipedia or buying socks, for example, so it's likely that both will coexist.

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